



Digital Culture & Education (DCE)

Publication details, including instructions for authors <http://www.digitalcultureandeducation.com/>

“Face to face” Learning from Others in Facebook Groups

Eleanor Sandry

Curtin University
Department of Internet Studies

Online Publication Date: 30 April, 2014

To cite this Article: Sandry, E. (2014). “Face to Face” Learning from others in Facebook Groups. *Digital Culture & Education*, 6:1, 1-12.

URL: <http://www.digitalcultureandeducation.com/cms/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/sandry.pdf>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

"FACE TO FACE" LEARNING FROM OTHERS IN FACEBOOK GROUPS

Eleanor Sandry

Abstract

This paper extends Emmanuel Levinas' articulation of "the face to face" encounter (1969, p. 79-81) to suggest that students and teachers can be brought into an ethical proximity created by the media they share and discuss online in Facebook. In Levinas' terms, a 'face' is not simply a physical face. Instead, the Levinasian face encapsulates all the ways that one person is able to reveal aspects of their personality to another. Interactions in Facebook remain "bounded by the impossibility of ever knowing the Other," as does all communication according to Levinas (Zembylas and Vrasidas, 2005, p. 72). However, while a profile picture may or may not disclose much information about a person, the content posted and shared online (in the form of text, images, videos, likes, etc) reveals aspects of an individual's personality in a way that encourages responses from others. Facebook can therefore bring people unable to meet in the same physical and temporal location into a proximity created by their online disclosure. In addition, the asymmetry between students and teachers, emphasised in spaces such as lecture theatres, is destabilised in Facebook to provide students and teachers the opportunity to learn from one another's shared ideas, experiences and understandings.

Keywords: Asymmetry, Ethics, Face, Facebook, Learning, Levinas, Online.

Introduction

Arguments about the possibilities of online learning and the effectiveness of platforms used for its provision can be related to the debates around the "deficit" or "surplus" appraisals of online communication in comparison with face-to-face communication, as well as considerations of the relative merits of online and face-to-face communities as supporting "thin" or "thick" engagement between members (Johnson, 2010; Introna & Bringham, 2007). Underlying both sides of these debates is a polarised view, which absolutely separates the possibilities of online from offline communication. The boundary line between the two has most often been drawn in relation to the presence or absence of human facial and bodily expressions, and more recently (now that emoticons, avatars, images and video are more widely used) the presence or absence of the opportunity to interact with someone in the flesh by encountering them in the same physical space (Johnson, 2010). Some scholars privilege the richness of face-to-face interaction over online communication, noting the latter's deficit of non-verbal and emotional cues, whereas others argue that the flexibility of online communication, where first impressions can be separated from one's physical appearance, offer people a surplus of ways to alter the impression they make to fit a particular context as they wish (Johnson, 2010). Following on from this is the argument over whether the lack of physical closeness online can lead only to weak, or thin, community contact being made, or whether the flexibility of online communication promotes complex, or thick, community relations (Introna & Bringham, 2007).

As opposed to reworking these debates, this paper considers what happens when one ceases to privilege the presence or absence of a physical human face to support meaningful communication. Instead, it introduces a broader understanding of what can

be meant by the term ‘face,’ by extending the phenomenological and ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas’ conception of the face was drawn out of his examination of human encounters in the same physical space. However, his description of the self-other encounter as “the face to face,” stresses that the face of the other is not simply a set of physical features that can be seen, but rather the means by which the other reveals themselves to the self (1969, p. 79-81). This conception of face as a means of revealing otherness suggests that it is possible to extend Levinas’ description of the ethical self-other encounter into online spaces. Therefore, although it is certainly not something that Levinas’ himself would have done, this paper employs the idea of the Levinasian face in support of new ways to frame the potential of interactions in Facebook as part of higher education learning programs.

Facebook and online communication

Online platforms have extended the idea of computer-mediated communication (CMC) beyond the confines of text. They have radically increased the ease of communicating with other people, both individually and as a group, using a combination of text, audio, still images and videos across spatial and temporal divisions. The sharing of these different media forms adds to the richness of online communication in ways that support many possibilities for disseminating information, indicating emotional reactions and revealing aspects of personality, personal history and experiential knowledge. Although this is true of a number of online communication platforms, in terms of current popularity and number of users, “Facebook has no effective imitators” other than a few specific services such as “Weibo in China and VK in Russia” designed to cater for particular differences in language, politics and culture (Allen, 2012, p. 214). The use of Facebook to keep in contact with ‘friends’ (who may fall into a number of categories such as acquaintances or work colleagues) is now a feature of many people’s everyday lives. Facebook is primarily thought of as a space for maintaining social connections with others, but different people take this to mean different things, whether sharing aspects of their everyday life experience, publicising the causes in which they feel most heavily invested, or sharing interesting or amusing things they have seen on the Internet.

Most educators and students are insistent that their personal Facebook networks should be carefully separated, since neither group really wants the other to see everything that is posted to their Facebook timelines. In addition, it has been suggested that some educators might be uncomfortable with the Facebook environment, because it reduces the hierarchical separation between teacher and learner that is familiar from the lecture theater environment (Allen, 2012). Nonetheless, the popularity of Facebook and the regularity with which it is checked by its users suggests that this Social Network Site (SNS) might be a good way of making and maintaining contact between students and teachers, to share information through a platform that is becoming increasingly familiar, and is considerably more flexible than institutional email systems or commonly used institutional Learning Management Systems (LMSs), such as Blackboard or Moodle.

Facebook friend networks and Facebook groups in education

Facebook’s popularity with both students and teachers in higher education is not primarily driven by the use of this SNS as an educational environment; instead, it is more commonly understood as a way of maintaining a personal network of family, friends and acquaintances. Whether the people in this network are family members, or

met through school, college or university, through work, or socially, the majority of them are also known offline. Indeed, boyd and Ellison note, "[w]hat makes social network sites unique is not that they allow individuals to meet strangers, but rather that they enable users to articulate and make visible their social networks" (2007). This general observation carries through to the specifics of "education-related interaction," where Facebook is again used "primarily for *maintaining* strong links between people already in relatively tight-knit, emotionally close offline relationships, rather than creating new points of contact" (Selwyn, 2009, p. 170). The interactions between Facebook friends, including those in an educational context, are therefore often subject to face-to-face rules that have already been defined in various specific offline contexts. However, the granularity of interaction possible in Facebook will be dependent on whether people in one's Facebook network have been placed in specific lists (eg 'Close Friends,' 'Acquaintance,' etc) appropriate to the context from which they are known and the closeness of the relationship, or whether they remain categorised under the general heading 'Friends.'

Although boyd and Ellison's contention that the most important aspect of SNSs is to make one's offline social networks visible is well supported, networks such as Facebook do nonetheless enable online interactions between people who may remain strangers offline. This is particularly the case when people become members of Facebook groups, which can be understood as networks that define specific communities of users. Importantly, these group networks are able to cut across users' friendship networks, as opposed to existing only within them. Group networks therefore enable interactions between strangers, brought together only by their membership of the group. In addition, posts (including comments and likes) within a closed group are shared only with other members of that group, and are not shared across member's friend networks through the newsfeed. Interactions between people in closed groups are likely, therefore, to be subject to different social rules from those between Facebook friends. Within a closed group people may choose to reveal, through their posts to the group wall, different aspects of their personality from those which they choose to share more generally with their Facebook friend network.

Neil Selwyn notes that in public wall posts "online exchanges" were "merely a continuation of how students talk to each other in other contexts" (2009, p. 172). Therefore, students tended to portray the role of either "the passive, disengaged student" or alternatively "the angry, critical student," and students taking the opportunity "to present a self-image of being more intellectually engaged or enthused by one's subject were noticeable by their absence" (2009, p. 172). John Suler suggests that "[t]he self does not exist separate from the environment in which that self is expressed," and therefore "[d]ifferent modalities of online communication (e.g., e-mail, chat, video) and different environments (e.g., social, vocational, fantasy) may facilitate diverse expressions of self" (2004, p. 325). Importantly, none of these expressions "is necessarily more true than another" (Suler, 2004, p. 325). It is therefore quite possible that within a closed Facebook group, centered on a particular academic unit or subject area, students might be more willing to appear openly interested in their studies, while maintaining more of a disengaged or critical perspective in posts designed for their Facebook friends.

A Facebook group provides a visible network of people involved with a course or unit that have decided to join the group. It therefore acts as a collection point for students, with the potential for supporting a community of learners in a particular subject area. This community can be easily visualised, because Facebook keeps a record of the group's members and identifies them by their names and profile pictures for all other members of the group to see. In some cases, students may use a pseudonym,

and/or profile picture that hides their offline identity, but in general Facebook promotes the idea of appearing as oneself. Depending on the privacy settings each individual has applied to their Facebook profile, other information from these profiles that is made publicly available will also be available to group members by clicking through from the person's name and profile image. Although some people who meet through a group may decide to 'friend' one another on Facebook, it is also possible that many will not, and they will therefore effectively remain strangers to one another, brought together only by their enrolment in a particular unit or course of education. This raises the question of how well these loosely connected groups operate as communities, and also how best to understand the learning that might take place within them.

Education and the value of critical and ethical communities

In "Reconsidering community and the stranger" (2007), Lucas Introna and Martin Brigham note that the formation of strong communities is most often assumed to depend upon physical closeness and/or the acceptance or development of "a particular shared value," such that a "community can only exist through the inculcation and assimilation of others into the dominant concerns of the group" (p. 167). Central to this conception of community is the idea that human communication acts as a bridge between individuals, whether by enabling the accurate transmission or exchange of information, supporting persuasive influence over others, creating shared understandings of the world or promoting group agreement via critical rational debate. However, some communications scholars, such as John Durham Peters (1999) and Amit Pinchevski (2005), argue that accepting this idea results in a level of 'violence' to the other. As Pinchevski explains, "[t]raditional communication theories are largely about the reduction of difference or the transcendence of difference, and consequently, the elimination of difference" (2005, p. 65).

Although without such a clear focus on 'violence' to the other, similar concerns are presented in Introna and Brigham's paper, as demonstrated by their use of the words "inculcation and assimilation," and later "incorporation and coercion," to describe the basis for most popular views of community (2007, p. 167). As an alternative, they suggest the value of seeing "community as critical and ethical involvement," an idea that seems particularly relevant in an educational context where critical engagement and ethics are valued in both teaching and research (2007, p. 167). Introna and Brigham explore this possibility by drawing on Levinas' philosophy of the ethical encounter between self and other, a philosophy that also forms the basis for Pinchevski's exploration of ethical communication.

In contrast with theory that regards communication as a bridge, and communities as developing around shared values, a phenomenological perspective describes interactions between people more openly as opportunities to encounter others and their differences (Craig, 1999). Levinas, for example, describes the self as meeting the other in what he terms "the face to face," an encounter which brings them into 'proximity,' but also retains a clear sense of the irreducible 'distance' between them (1969, p. 79-81). For Levinas, the terms proximity and distance do not describe how close interlocutors are to each other in physical space. Instead, the idea of proximity identifies any situation allowing the other to reveal a 'face' to the self, while the retention of distance is a reminder that the self can never completely comprehend the other. The Levinasian face to face, is therefore an encounter during which it is possible for the self to meet, and potentially to communicate with, the other, while continuing to acknowledge their absolute alterity. As Roger Silverstone notes, "Levinas' notion of proximity preserves

the separation of myself and the other" to ensure the presence of "both respect and responsibility for the other" (2003, p. 475). It is therefore possible for online interactions to enable proximity, by supporting communication in spite of physical separation. Indeed, since online technology enables asynchronous communication, it can also be regarded as a way to overcome temporal separation, such as that introduced by living in different time zones.

The importance of balancing proximity and distance, such that one can communicate while always respecting the other's difference, is encapsulated in Silverstone's term "proper distance," where "proper" is used to mean "distinctive, correct, and ethically or socially appropriate" (2003, p. 470). The conception of ethical communication and the maintenance of a proper distance between self and other is central to Introna and Brigham's "notion of community that is based on the ethical proximity of the stranger, the otherness of the other" as opposed to a reliance on "shared values, or shared concerns" (2007, p. 166). It is also relevant to Sharon Todd's exploration of "how ethics and education might be rethought together as a relation across difference" (2003, p. 2). As she explains, "[t]he idea that we only need to get to know someone in order to be able to act responsibly (and responsively) toward that person" is easy to accept without question, and this viewpoint is often seen in the emphasis educators place upon "getting to know students through their experiences, cultural backgrounds, etc." (2003, p. 8). However, assuming that one must learn about the other in this way in order to respond to them suggests that "otherness can be understood and that learning about others is pedagogically and ethically desirable" (Todd, 2003, p. 8). If, instead of seeing the other as defined by social and cultural differences, the other is regarded from the philosophical perspective as fundamentally other in an ontological sense, this undermines the assumption "that knowing leads to better ethical reflection, and that de-'Othering' is a worthy moral aspiration" (Todd, 2003, p. 9). As "the idea that learning about others is an appropriate ethical response to difference" is set aside, "the question that begins to emerge is how we learn *from* the other" (Todd, 2003, p. 9, my emphasis). In terms of Facebook and education, it is therefore valuable to explore how the other can reveal a Levinasian face online, to support the critical and ethical involvement within a Facebook group acting as a community within which teachers and students can learn from one another.

Revealing Levinasian 'faces' online

Central to Levinas' conception of the ethical encounter is the other's ability to reveal their face, an action that, as I have already discussed, can seem difficult to achieve in online environments. Indeed, as Laurie Johnson notes, the perceived lack of faces online is used as the basis for arguing that face-to-face and CMC are "inherently different" from each other, leading to "[t]he possibility of an ethical encounter in CMC" being totally denied (2010). Levinas himself concentrated on discussing encounters between selves and others in the same physical space, and was reported to be uneasy even while conversing on the telephone, constantly worried that he had been cut off (Derrida, 2013, p. 321). This suggests that he would be unlikely to have considered online communication as able to draw self and other into the proximity of his conception of a face to face encounter with any great success.

However, the use of computer interfaces has, for a number of years, made still images of faces readily available and, more recently, the sharing of videos and also live videoconferencing has become a familiar part of some workplaces and homes. Questions may be raised over whether the online presentation of faces on screens can provoke as strong a response for a viewer as may be felt in a face-to-face meeting. For

example, Introna shares his personal experience of finding it easier to ignore someone when their face was mediated by an intercom screen, as opposed to being encountered directly at the open front door (2001). Johnson also acknowledges that online images cannot “simply reproduce a face-to-face relation in the immediacy of what we would consider a full presence” (2007, p. 53). It is therefore important to note that, although Levinas’ philosophy is embedded in his consideration of the physical encounter between self and other, the term ‘face’ in his writing does not simply refer to a physical human face. Indeed, he contends that rather than turning “towards the Other as toward an object” by concentrating on physical facial features, “[t]he best way of encountering the other is not even to notice the colour of his eyes” (Levinas, 1985, p. 85-86). Levinas also clarifies that “the whole body—a hand or curve of the shoulder—can express as the face” (1969, p. 262). During physical meetings, and to some extent a videoconference, the other’s expression might for example include head, hand and overall body movement. Furthermore, as Johnson highlights, at times Levinas seems to suggest that “the face could potentially be anything that conveys an expression” (2007, p. 52). The Levinasian face can therefore be understood as something more transcendent than physical, which encapsulates all the various ways that the other can reveal aspects of their personality to the self.

Taking this broad conception of face into consideration supports a deeper exploration of the possibilities of revelation online in social network environments. The pertinent question is not whether online others reveal physical faces through images or videos with the same immediacy and presence as they do offline, but rather whether online communication allows them to reveal a Levinasian face. Is it possible for the other to express and reveal their specific differences online, such that they can command the attention of their Facebook friends or those with whom they connect through Facebook groups? Richard Cohen argues that “the ethical dimension of human proximity transpires across the communications made possible by computers, just as human proximity takes place across phone calls, letters, artifacts. The ‘face’ can be a letter. The ‘face’ can be an email message” (2000, p. 34). Introna and Brigham also contend that ethical proximity can be reached both through the television screen, and via online messages and emails (2007, p. 175). It therefore seems reasonable to suggest that a Levinasian face can be revealed on platforms such as Facebook, possibly even more strongly than via emails and messages, through the act of posting, commenting on and ‘liking’ a variety of media for others to see.

Levinasian faces in Facebook

While a profile picture may, or may not, disclose much information about someone, posting and sharing content (in the form of text, images, music, videos, comments, likes, etc) online, and responding through further posts, comments and likes, has the potential to reveal many aspects of an individual’s personality. As Matthew Allen notes, “[f]undamentally, Facebook is a system for communicating to others the interests, passions, pleasures and business of the individual, ‘showing off’ the self” (2012, p. 216). Facebook “gives users a way of offering themselves to others, to gain attention,” and this broad understanding of personal disclosure through sharing content suggests the potential of revealing a Levinasian face online, since it is through personal disclosure that the other calls for an ethical response from the self (2012, p. 217). Although Allen goes further to suggest that people can be “understood” through what they share on Facebook, adopting a Levinasian perspective leads me to insist that what is revealed through Facebook can only support a partial understanding (2012, p. 217). In addition, while the system facilitates an “easy reciprocity in the giving of attention,” most notably

through the ability to 'Like' a post or comment, there is nonetheless always a choice over whether to reciprocate on Facebook (2012, p. 217). Ideas of partial connection and comprehension, alongside the potential for communication that is not reciprocated, may offer a more pragmatic understanding of what occurs in Facebook groups made up in most cases of loosely connected people that may remain more clearly categorised as 'strangers' to one another as opposed to ever reaching the status of Facebook 'friends'. Facebook works well as an online environment to support meaningful encounters between people because of the relative ease of sharing and viewing rich media through its interface in comparison with, for example, Blackboard discussion boards. Most users are now very familiar with the technological aspects of Facebook, such that the underlying technology has become less and less noticeable. This is true not only of Facebook's web interface, but also the smartphone and tablet apps for the platform. The majority of users find all of these interfaces so familiar and easy to use that sharing resources is a simple task, from the perspective of the person posting and also of the reader/viewer. As Clay Shirky notes, "[c]ommunication tools don't get socially interesting until they get technically boring" (2008, p. 105). Facebook groups can therefore be favorably compared with the less sophisticated discussion board and bulletin board interfaces that are commonly found in institutional LMS environments such as Blackboard. In Facebook, the sharing of words, images, videos and other information takes place in an environment where people are more able to concentrate on the content itself, and the potential meanings it conveys, as opposed to the technical difficulties of sharing or viewing content. It is easy to reply with a 'Like,' a comment, or even a relevant rich media response of one's own, and such sharing is made flexible, 'anyplace, anytime,' through the use of mobile devices. By allowing people to focus on the content shared through the links between people, as opposed to the network as a technology, Facebook is therefore more likely to support the revelation of a Levinasian face than the more technically challenging LMS interfaces.

From this perspective, "[t]he principal feature of Facebook, therefore, is not within the system so to speak, nor even determined by its use: the principal feature is each user and how they come to be known" through the content that they post (Allen, 2012, p. 216). Facebook can be understood to draw together the idea of the network technology and the human subjects interacting through that network so closely that the human "entanglement with media on a sociocultural and biological level" suggests that "media cannot be fully externalized from subjects" (Kember & Zylinksa, 2012, p. 1). This reinforces the idea that it is the on-going interactions that are recorded, through what is shared, liked and the comments made, that are more important than the underlying structure of connections between users (whether they are 'friends,' or members of the same group). Indeed, the underlying membership structure of a Facebook group can be quickly forgotten, along with the people that withdraw from the group completely or lurk and only read and view content; instead, the group becomes more clearly identified with those who are the most active, who post, like and comment on a regular basis. These active group members are identifiable not only from their Facebook profile images, but also by the tone of their comments, and the details of the multimedia content that they share. These are the people whose interactions with the group most clearly demonstrate the revelation of a Levinasian face—a face that is not physical, but rather a revelation of being—online.

Taking responsibility for learning and sharing personal perspectives

From early analysis of closed Facebook groups used in 2013 for two separate iterations of a Web Media unit at Curtin University, it can be seen that a number of students not only comment on material posted by the lecturer, but also ask questions and share their own source materials and examples through the Facebook groups. Although this shared content is light-hearted at times, it is also sometimes serious, for example legal or policy-related material, and is always relevant to the concerns of the unit as a whole. In a more structured situation, Murat Kayri and Öslem Çakir describe how the introduction of a Facebook group enabled learning to be “shaped by the students,” such that they even developed their own “lesson materials” (2010, p. 56). A closed Facebook group is therefore of practical use, because it offers a “coherent space for collective interaction” related to a specific context that can remain separate from “the individuated behaviour” more generally presented through a profile, timeline and information shared on the newsfeed with friends (Allen, 2012, p. 215). In spite of this separation, it is important to stress that students may feel more comfortable sharing their personal ideas and opinions in a Facebook group than in, for example, Blackboard, because Facebook is perceived as a less formal space than a traditional LMS. Indeed, by sharing their own experiences in relation to various platforms and media in the unit’s Facebook group, Curtin Web Media students were better able to grasp the implications of differences in access to media between city dwellers and those living in small country towns.

Sharing, in the context of a closed Facebook group, allows individual students to explore aspects of themselves and others in relation to the group’s subject matter. They are able to post what they are most interested in, and see how this compares with the thoughts of others. Since the people brought together in a Facebook group are not necessarily Facebook friends there is an increased likelihood that the unfamiliar experience and history of others in the group may highlight very different perspectives about the course or unit content. As people share views, opinions and examples that particularly appeal to them, their interactions with the group are also likely to help them situate their existing knowledge and experience in relation to what they are learning. As Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylińska suggest, people and the media that they share, comment upon and like in Facebook are co-constituted (2012, p.164). This perspective highlights not only that people reveal themselves through what they post on Facebook, but also that their self-understanding may change as a result of reading the posts of others. Through the more personal nature of posts in the Facebook group, as opposed to an LMS, students are drawn into proximity. They have an increased opportunity to encounter the other’s ideas and experiences in ways that resonate with Levinas’ conception of “the face to face” (1969, p. 79-81). Although an LMS discussion board may have the capability to foster this level of response, if presented and managed by teachers as somewhere that welcomes personal as well as more formal reading and research-related posts, the lack of ease and immediacy of posting is likely to reduce the dynamic nature of the revelation-response interaction. In addition, the LMS is often perceived as a space in which a teacher-student hierarchy is clearly maintained, and sometimes even reinforced when the system overtly marks teachers’ posts as from controllers, coordinators or lecturers.

Asymmetry and sharing in Facebook

There is often a clear asymmetry between students and teachers; one that is emphasised in spaces such as lecture theatres, and, as I have just mentioned, also in LMSs. As Suler

notes, "[a]uthority figures express their status and power in their dress, body language, and in the trappings of their environmental settings" (2004, p. 324). This is true of the lecturer who may choose to dress more smartly when presenting, and is often required to take centre stage because of the physical arrangement of the lecture theatre as a space. However, this display of authority can be lessened in tutorial rooms, where a careful choice of seating layout, use of less formal language, and taking time to ensure inclusivity can be used to break down the asymmetry somewhat. It has been argued that online environments can reduce the perception of authority and thus the feeling of asymmetry, making an interaction feel "more like a peer relationship" (Suler, 2004, p. 324). Although the identity of the lecturer or tutor is often known in Facebook, it is not so overtly stated as in an LMS. In addition, the teacher's authority can be further reduced by embracing less formal language, the choice of what is shared and how, and the use of likes and comments to encourage greater student participation.

As I have discussed, in Facebook all parties are able to share their thoughts, experiences and examples relating to a subject in a flexible and, to many people, familiar environment. In this online space, the asymmetry between communicators has the potential to be more fluid, changing as different perspectives and ideas are shared within student groups, and between teachers and students. There is a complex asymmetrical relation to be played out online, but it is worth remembering that this is also present (in a different form) in the offline tutorial space. Teachers take responsibility for acting as mediators, facilitators, occasional arbitrators and also providers of information about the 'official' content (terminology used, theory explored) and/or the organisation of the unit (ie when assignments are due, what style of referencing to use etc). However, they are also responsible for encouraging students to feel comfortable in making contributions. There is great potential in using both tutorial rooms and Facebook groups as places where teachers can take a less formal and more personal approach, revealing aspects of their personalities by sharing their thoughts and experiences of the subject at hand, as opposed to reiterating the unit material. By encouraging this level of interaction the emphasis moves towards developing a critical and ethical involvement with other people, and creating a community within which teachers and students are able to learn from one another.

Conclusion

An ethical stance to online communication would seem to be particularly important in educational contexts. For this reason, I have tried to draw together ideas about ethical communication, ethical and critical communities and education as learning from the other in this paper. This has been done by exploring the possibility of taking Levinas' conception of the face to face encounter into an online setting. However, as Johnson notes, any argument that a face can be revealed in online communication is not in itself sufficient to guarantee an ethical encounter in systems such as Facebook (2010). In spite of this, the theory discussed in this paper does support the potential for ethical, critical and educational encounters to occur online, with the particular example explored being the possibilities of a Facebook group. Of course, the success of any Facebook group, as is the case for a face-to-face lecture, seminar or tutorial, will depend on the participants and the particular group dynamic that develops.

Although I have concentrated on discussing a number of potential benefits of using Facebook in education, it is important to note that the institution, teachers and students have no real control over how this system might work in the future. While the Facebook group is seen to have great potential to support contained communication about a unit in its present form, in its next iteration posts, even from closed groups,

might be shared on people's overarching timelines (and thus with all of their friends). The decision to broaden access to posted information has been a feature in the past as Facebook has developed, and this trend may well continue. After all, the platform is not designed as a space for education, it is a business that collects and markets peoples' information in exchange for providing them with a means to communicate and share online. Even in its present form, not all students perceive even closed Facebook groups as safe environments. Some still worry that "their academic performance ... could be discovered by their social friends" or that "their personal information and social lives might be accessed by the tutor" (Wang et al, p. 436). In addition, while Facebook is currently the most widely used and familiar SNS, it is possible that this will change. Allying education with a particular piece of commercial software, at least in part on the basis of its popularity, means that if it is superseded there will be considerable pressure to move to whatever new platform comes along. This may or may not introduce new possibilities and/or problems for teachers and students.

Many people now have Facebook accounts and use this SNS on a regular basis, but in spite of its popularity it should not be assumed that all students use the system. In my experience, even as recently as 2013, there are always a few students that have never used Facebook and some of these people will not want to sign up. Occasionally there will also be students who used Facebook in the past, have left the SNS and are strongly opposed to rejoining. Indeed, even some regular Facebook users may not want to use what they regard as a site for social interactions as an educational space. The implication of this is that material shared and discussed in Facebook should be additional to the core course content, or that it should be shared with all students on the institution's LMS or elsewhere, to include those students not on Facebook. This introduces a further issue for some students, who then feel under pressure to check in Facebook, the LMS and any other site being used to support information sharing and discussion, resulting in the complaint that there are too many demands on their attention.

In spite of these provisos, thinking about online education and communities in Facebook groups from a Levinasian perspective emphasises the importance of both teachers and students taking responsibility for each other and for learning. At its heart, the face to face is about paying respectful attention to others, and it therefore supports the idea of learning from the other, as opposed to either learning about the other or simply instructing the other. Levinas stresses the need to embrace ethical communication as non-reciprocal, (i.e. one makes the decision to communicate without the expectation of a response, an idea that is particularly suited to considerations of online communication where responses can be elusive). In addition, his description of the face to face encounter acknowledges the existence of an asymmetry between interlocutors, and can be extended to allow this asymmetry to be fluid and changing depending on the specific context. A conception of communication and relation drawn from Levinas provides a way of explaining what is happening when online interactions work so that a partial connection is made between people, or an unexpected post highlights a new piece of valuable information or previously unconsidered perspective. Of key importance, supporting this connection and learning, is the idea that teachers and learners not only share information, but also share aspects of their own personal perspectives on the material. They are thus able to reveal Levinasian faces, with SNSs such as Facebook tending to emphasise the personal by encouraging less formal posts more strongly than is commonly seen in interactions through LMSs such as Blackboard. In addition, embracing the idea that the asymmetry in the relation between teachers and learners can oscillate depending on the direction an online discussion takes, offers the potential for anyone in the group to learn from anyone else, whether students from other students, students from teachers or teachers from students.

References

- Allen, M. (2012). An education in Facebook. *Digital Culture & Education*, 4(3), 213–225.
- boyd, danah m., & Ellison, N. B. (2007). Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13(1). Retrieved from <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol13/issue1/boyd.ellison.html>
- Cohen, R. A. (2000). Ethics and cybernetics: Levinasian reflections. *Ethics and Information Technology*, 2, 27–35.
- Craig, R. T. (1999). Communication theory as a field. *Communication Theory*, 9(2), 119–161.
- Derrida, J. (2013). *Signature Derrida*. (J. Williams, Ed.). Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press.
- Introna, L. D. (2001). Virtuality and Morality: On (not) Being Disturbed by the Other. *Philosophy in the Contemporary World*, 8(1), 11–19.
- Introna, L. D., & Brigham, M. (2007). Reconsidering community and the stranger in the age of virtuality. *Society and Business Review*, 2(2), 166–178. doi:10.1108/17465680710757385
- Johnson, L. (2007). Face-interface or the prospect of a virtual ethics. *Ethical Space*, 4(1/2), 49–56.
- Johnson, L. (2010). GUI Faces / Sticky Ethics. *Transformations*, (18). Retrieved from http://www.transformationsjournal.org/journal/issue_18/article_03.shtml
- Kayri, M., & Çakır, O. (2010). An Applied Study on Educational Use of Facebook as a Web 2.0 Tool: The Sample Lesson of Computer Networks and Communication. *International Journal of Computer Science and Information Technology*, 2(4), 48–58. doi:10.5121/ijcsit.2010.2405
- Kember, S., & Zylinska, J. (2012). *Life after new media: mediation as a vital process*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Levinas, E. (1969). *Totality and infinity*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- Levinas, E. (1985). *Ethics and infinity* (1st ed.). Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- Peters, J. D. (1999). *Speaking into the air: a history of the idea of communication*. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press.
- Pinchevski, A. (2005). *By way of interruption: Levinas and the ethics of communication*. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Dusque University Press.
- Selwyn, N. (2009). Faceworking: exploring students' education-related use of Facebook. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 34(2), 157–174. doi:10.1080/17439880902923622
- Shirky, C. (2008). *Here comes everybody: the power of organizing without organizations*. New York: Penguin Press.
- Silverstone, R. (2003). Proper distance: towards an ethics for cyberspace. In G. Liestøl, A. Morrison, & T. Rasmussen (Eds.), *Digital media revisited: theoretical and conceptual innovation in digital domains* (pp. 469–491). Cambridge, Mass.; London: MIT Press.
- Suler, J. (2004). The Online Disinhibition Effect. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 7(3), 321–326.
- Todd, S. (2003). *Learning from the other: Levinas, psychoanalysis, and ethical possibilities in education*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Wang, Q., Woo, H. L., Quek, C. L., Yang, Y., & Liu, M. (2012). Using the Facebook group as a learning management system: An exploratory study. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 43(3), 428–438. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8535.2011.01195.x
- Zembylas, M., & Vrasidas, C. (2005). Levinas and the "inter-face": The ethical challenge of online education

Biographical Statement

Eleanor Sandry is an Early Career Development Fellow in the Department of Internet Studies at Curtin University, Western Australia. Her research is focused on exploring a diverse range of communication theory in developing an ethical and pragmatic recognition of, and respect for, otherness and difference in communication. Her research has discussed communication in the lecture theatre, analyzed human-robot interactions as models of communication, and considered offline and online communication in education and everyday life.

Contact: e.sandry@curtin.edu.au